

Panthers Indicted on Assault Counts for Jail Incident

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Five Black Panthers were indicted by the County Grand Jury Wednesday on charges of assaulting sheriff's deputies at Central Jail.

The indictments—with \$50,000 bail on each of the accused—were returned only hours after the head of the Panther group, Elmer Pratt, was released on bail on an earlier charge. Pratt claimed that deputies provoked the fight in the jail Feb. 6.

Pratt and the other four accused who are still in custody—Lloyd Mimms, George Young, Paul Redd, and Roger Lee Lewis—are due to appear in Superior Court today for arraignment on the assault charges.

All of the defendants except Lewis were arrested Dec. 8 during a raid on three Panther buildings and are awaiting trial. Lewis was arrested last July and charged with conspiring to murder police officers.

Six deputies reportedly told the grand jury Wednesday that when they attempted to move the five from a cellblock in which they were allegedly creating a disturbance, the militants attacked the deputies. Two deputies were seriously injured. An attorney for the Panthers claimed that they also were injured.

Dispute Deputies' Version

Pratt and Luke McKissack, his attorney, disputed the deputies' version of the fight.

At a press conference at McKissack's office, Pratt called the incident "a setup . . . They knew we were going to court to get our bails reduced and didn't want any trouble . . . It was an ambush. We had to fight back."

Pratt said the jailers were constantly baiting the prisoners with racial slurs and tried to provoke a fight. According to Pratt, the jailers played a game in which a deputy would say, "What kind of things live in cages?"

Another deputy would allegedly reply, "Animals in a zoo." And the first deputy would assertedly agree, "They must be animals and we must be zoo keepers."

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Pratt's accusation that the deputies plotted to have the Panthers' bail increased was believed questionable since the Panthers appeared for a bail hearing several hours after the fight and no one from the Sheriff's Department told the court of the incident. The judge reduced bail on the defendants.

McKissack said he had a witness who would testify that he heard a deputy say, "I'd like to have a .38 and take target practice at those niggers."

The lawyer said the Sheriff's Department had

denied him access to other prisoners in the jail so that he could question them about the fight and obtain witnesses.

He charged the district attorney's office with secretly rushing the case through the County Grand Jury without the defense having a chance to present

witnesses.

Dep. Dist. Atty. Stephen S. Trott said he offered the defense the chance to present any witnesses it chose to the grand jury, but McKissack and his colleague, Leo Branton Jr., who are handling the defense jointly, declined the offer.

In another legal development Wednesday, the Panthers' lawyers filed a \$120 million claim against the city stemming from the raid at the Central Ave. headquarters Dec. 8.

According to the claim, 12 men and women were

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attacked by police while asleep. The Panthers charge that as a result of "wrongful actions" they suffered severe bodily and mental damage and ask \$120 million in damages for each of the 12.

The claim will be for-

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warded to the City Council which will pay or reject the claim. If the claim is rejected, the Panthers can then file suit in court.